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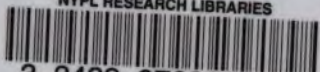
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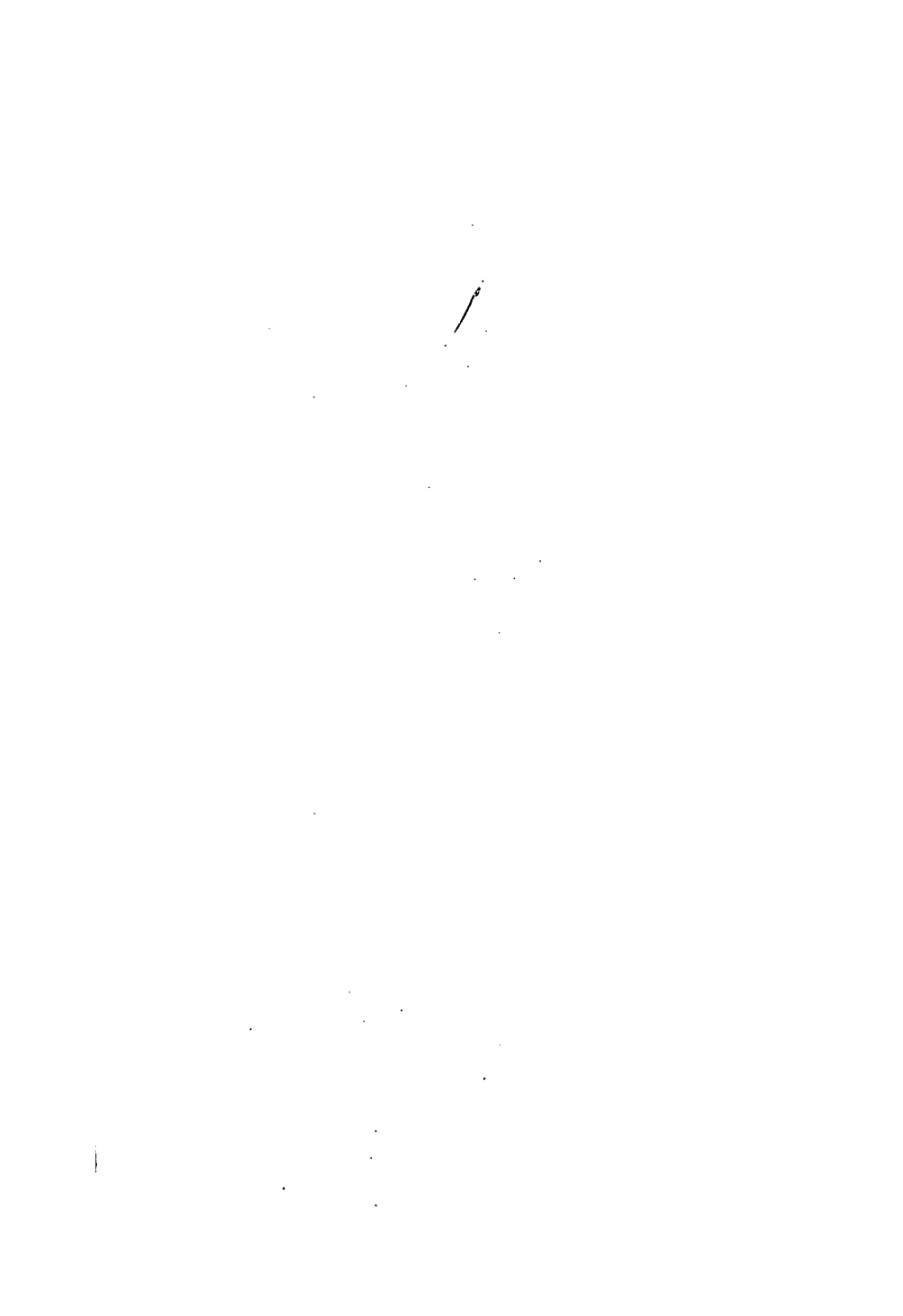
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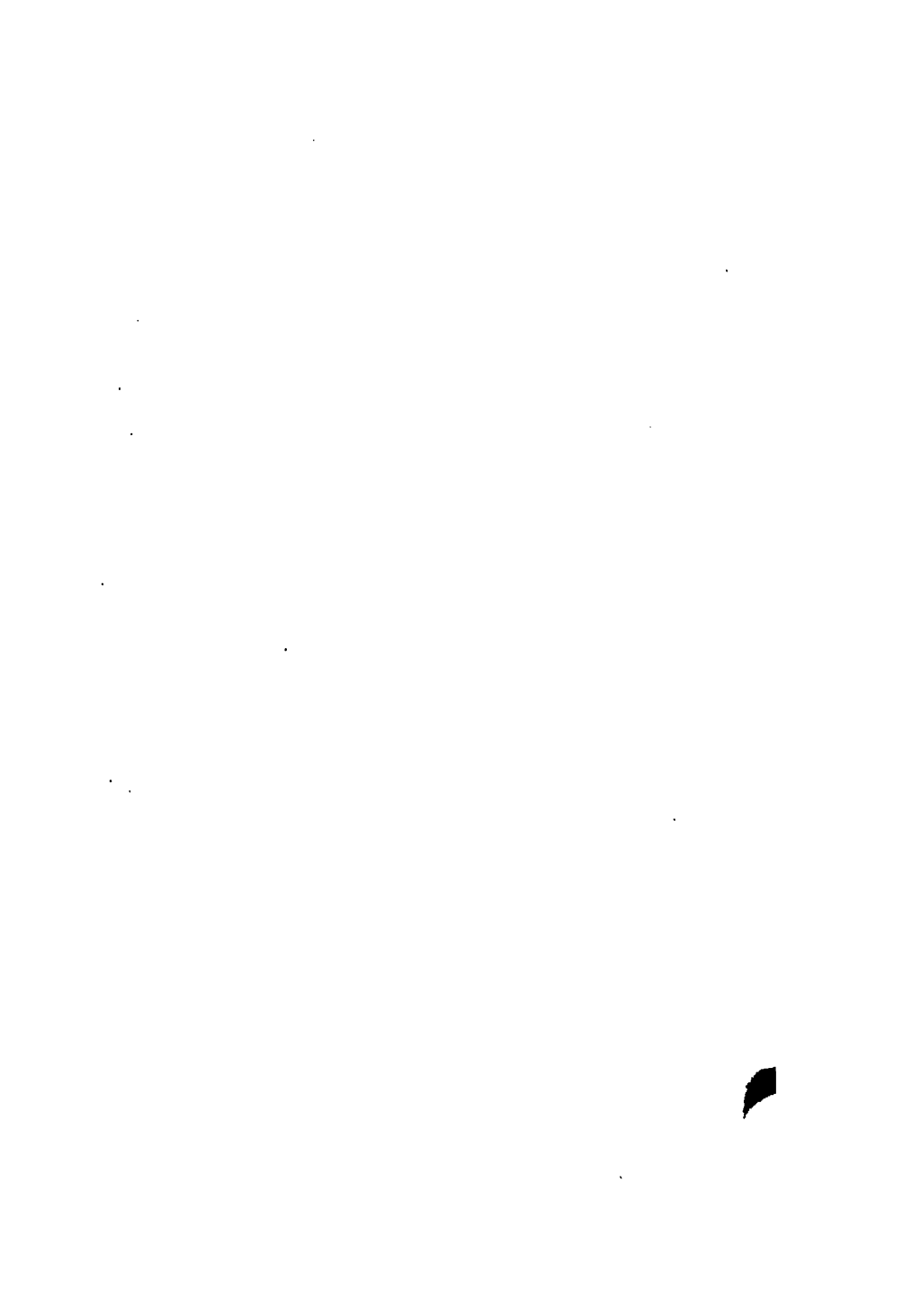


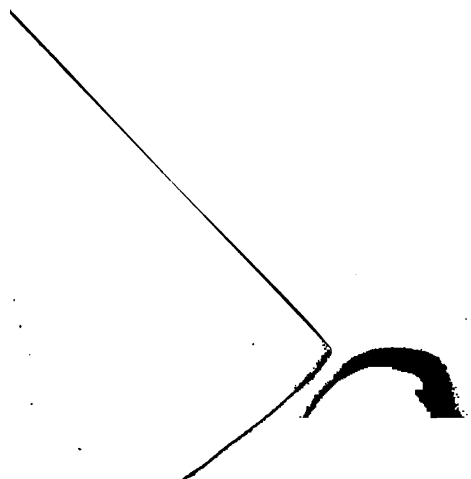
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KATE WETHERILL



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KATE^F WETHERILL

AN EARTH COMEDY

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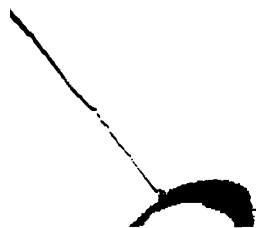
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TO
GERALD STANLEY LEE

“‘With this same key
Shakespeare unlocked his heart,’
Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!”



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PART I

"Inasmuch as it begins with Hell."



“Whence we see why my work is called ‘Comoedia.’ For if we regard the matter, in the commencement it is horrible and offensive, inasmuch as it begins with Hell; but in the conclusion it is prosperous, pleasant, and desirable, inasmuch as it ends with Paradise. If we look to the style, that is lax and unpretending, since it is written in the vulgar tongue, in which women and children speak.”

DANTE ALIGHIERI.

(*Epistle to Can Grande.*)

PART I

I

THE deacon was sitting in the big rocker, his blue-stockinged feet stretched comfortably before him, reading the "Weekly Clarion."

With no word of warning, the lamp at his elbow was transferred to a small stand, leaving the "Clarion" in semi-darkness, while the white table-cloth was exchanged for a red one. It whisked into place, with a flutter of fringe about the deacon's ears.

He showed no impatience at the sudden eclipse. Being of daily occurrence and inexorable, it had something of the dignity of nature. He shifted his position a little, dropping the "Clarion" to his knee and taking off his steel-bowed spectacles,

squinting at them with his blue eyes and polishing them on his handkerchief.

The eyes followed his wife's rather brisk movements with a leisurely twinkle. She returned the lamp from the little stand, bringing with it a basket of stockings and a skein of blue cotton yarn.

"I suppose they cut down the salary," she remarked casually, after darning for half an hour or more in silence.

"No, they did n't," said the deacon, shortly.

"Going to give him two thousand again?" she asked incredulously.

The deacon nodded, keeping within the safe pale of silence.

"They can't raise it." There was no recrimination in the remark. It had the mild flavor of fact.

The deacon waited awhile.

"The pews bring eight hundred or so," he said after an interval.

She pressed down the edge of the hole she was darning, and held it off to survey it. Her face wore the look of abstracted innocence.



"And the Anne Sackford fund and Jacobs together, a thousand." He paused, feeling his way along the edge of the dangerous ground with cautious foot. "And the other seven or eight hundred we'll make up somehow. The ladies will make a hundred or two maybe. They gen'ally do," he added diplomatically.

She raised her eyelids a mere trifle, scrutinizing the holes in the fresh sock she was drawing over her hand.

"We kind o' talked over things a little," said the deacon, more expansively, "but we did n't come to nothing." He gazed contemplatively at his stockinged feet, working the toes back and forth in uncramped ease. "Peticerlers lie over until fall," he volunteered.

She glanced up a little impatiently at the Rochester burner, turning up the wick a trifle, looked sharply at the top to see that it was not smoking, and returned to her work. Her air indicated that church business as conducted by men was an affair of slight importance and some foolishness.

"John C. Jacobs there?" she inquired after a pause.

"Yes."

"He soft-soaped you all into some scheme or other, I suppose." The mild voice had an accent of scornful allusion.

The deacon looked annoyed. "I told you, Ma, we did n't do no business," he said a little testily, "except not to cut down the salary."

"Jacobs likes the minister pretty well," she said impartially.

The deacon drew in his feet. "I don't hear no complaints," he said.

"There 's a good many don't go to church," she said, rolling up a pair of socks and laying them on the table beside her.

"Who be they?" demanded the deacon. There was a note of challenge in the tone.

She surveyed him mildly over the top of her spectacles.

"I dunno 's I 'd be so techy about it, Pa," she said reprovngly. "It don't make no difference to us who goes to church."

"Who be they?" persisted the deacon.

She reflected, drawing the blue yarn absently through her fingers. "Well, there 's the Partridges," she said.

"They 're always shifting round."

"And the Munsons."

"They never give a dollar to any church yet."

She looked at him.

"I dunno 's our Lord went round talking about folks' giving dollars," she said after a pause. She spoke in the clear, impersonal tone of centuries.

The deacon had shifted uneasily under the glance.

"Maybe he did n't," he admitted.

"And there 's the Wetherills. I don't hardly ever see her to church," she went on.

The deacon's big face grew sober. "Maybe she 's busy," he said evasively.

She shook her head. "She wa'n't never too busy before old Dr. Griggs died.

"What do you suppose is the matter, Elihu?" she asked, leaning forward, with a sudden change of tone.

"I dunno, I 'm sure," said the deacon, reflectively. "It 's the children, like enough. Boys make a lot of trouble."

"A lot of work," she returned succinctly. "She looks worked to death the whole time. They ought to keep a girl"

"Dave 's putty well off," said the deacon, casually.

"He 's a man," she replied. "He'll let her work in that kitchen till she drops. People call it the dealings of Providence," she added with mild irony. "There 's a good many going around with crape hatbands."

"Dave 's just careless, Lucinda," said the deacon, in vicarious humility. "He don't think nothing about it. She always has worked and—"

"She always will," she interrupted. She took off her spectacles, laying them on the table beside the blue balls of stockings, and leaned forward in her chair, her mild face working with emotion. "I tell you, Elihu Goodsell," she said, "if there 's one person in this world I 'm sorry for, it 's the women."

"So 'm I," said the deacon, hastily—"and the men," he added in an after-tone of courage.

She gathered up the pile of stockings and departed for the bedroom. He was left to the kindly ministrations of silence, and thoughts that come from having the last word.

Half an hour later, when he laid his head on the pillow with a sigh, a voice asked gently in the darkness, "What you worrying about, Elihu?"

"Nothin' much."

"The meetin' was pretty troublesome, wa'n't it?"

"Some."

"Well, I would n't worry if I was you. You 've carried that church thirty years and more. Let somebody else do it awhile."

A comfortable silence followed. It was the silence that travels toward sleep. A cautious voice broke it after an interval.

"Pa?"

There was no reply.

“Elihu—” The tone was a little anxious. “You did n’t forget the yeast-cake again, did you?”

There was no response. A sound of heavy breathing filled the darkness.

The deacon was possibly asleep.

II


THE hot sun beat into the small kitchen. Dave had promised, every year since they were married, to put an awning over the south window. He had never done it. They had been married nineteen years.

One summer she had tried to do it herself. She had bought some unbleached cotton and sewed it into strips. She had borrowed the Colmans' ladder and, all one afternoon, had worked and tugged at the heavy frame. When Dave came home he swore. Then he went out and tore it down. He blustered that he was n't going to have any "puttering woman's work" on his house for folks to laugh at. Dave was always afraid of being laughed at. It was his conscience. The neighbors could have laughed the awning up

years ago. They never thought to do that. They only pitied her. She had put the unbleached cotton away in the attic. After a year or two she made it up into pillow-cases. It wore better than bleached.

She had vowed that she would never ask him again. But the hot July days always drove her to it. Vows were made to be broken. To love, honor, and obey was a farce. So were all the rest. How could a girl of eighteen know what she was doing? . . . to love and honor something that was too lazy to . . . to obey a boy who cared for nothing but base-ball and horse-racing!

The cruelty of fate was not a new theme for Mrs. Wetherill's thought. For nineteen years it had followed her about the hot kitchen. When her children were born, for the few days of rest, it had pressed close to her pillow. She had grown used to it. Sometimes she was afraid of it. She tried, through the long days, to think of other things. She culled bits from books and newspapers, and



pinned them over the sink on the yellow panels that she faced half her life. The words of Marcus Aurelius and Mark Twain and Emerson and Shakspere and Eugene Field and Anon. and Epictetus mingled with the steam and suds of dish-washing. She knew them by heart. She took them down and put up new ones—when she could find time. She liked Epictetus best. She could repeat pages from the little volume that had been pinned up leaf by leaf. She fancied that perhaps he knew better than the others what he was saying. He had never been a woman—or married. He was only a slave. But he knew. She rifled the book that contained his words. She had found it on a second-hand stand in Freeport. She always brought something from that stand when she went down, each spring and fall, for the family shopping. Dave grumbled. She went without something herself to make up for the shabby volumes she lugged home. Marcus Aurelius was a pair of cotton gloves; Emerson, a new gridiron.